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Young Adults: Prescription Drug Abuse *Is* Drug Abuse

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Better life through better chemistry—the American way. Look in the medicine cabinet of any American home, including your own, and you will see a multitude of drug preparations and prescriptions, ranging from over-the-counter cold and pain remedies to powerful prescription medication to treat a variety of conditions.

It's no surprise that prescription drug abuse has risen sharply in the last decade. Nonmedical use of prescription drugs such as opioids, central nervous system depressants and stimulants can lead to abuse and addiction, characterized by compulsive drug seeking and use.

You and your friends should understand that these are legal drugs with potentially lethal consequences without medical supervision.

Common drugs of abuse

The abuse of methylphenidate (Ritalin®), commonly used to treat attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), is now common. By crushing the tablets and snorting the drug, individuals attain a “cocaine-like” high. In fact, Ritalin has been shown to affect the brain in much the same way as cocaine.

Nonmedical use of pain relievers such as oxycodone with aspirin (Percodan®) and hydrocodone (Vicodin®) and the latest scourge, oxycontin, is on the rise. The Drug Abuse Warning Network, which collects data on drug-related episodes in hospital emergency departments, reported that in 2008 nonmedical use of opiates/opioid analgesics (pain relievers) accounted for over 300,000 emergency room visits in the U.S.

Why is the abuse of these drugs on the rise?

One reason is increased availability. It is now possible to obtain powerful prescription medication over the Internet from foreign countries as well as from illegal domestic sources, not to mention a parent's or friend's medicine cabinet. Also, many of these drugs are highly addicting so recreational use can quickly develop into dependency.

Signs of prescription drug abuse

- changes in appearance, including weight loss or weight gain
- loss of interest in school, work or once enjoyable activities
- lethargy and sleep problems, including insomnia or sleeping too much
- frequent illness or physical complaints. Many trips to the doctor for vague and poorly defined symptoms.
- change in bowel habits
- change of friends and activities
- irritability and restlessness or abrupt changes in mood or attitude
- unexplained absences
- missing medications from a family member
- unexplained money problems
- stealing
- blackouts and memory lapses
- inability to stop using

If you are, or a friend is, abusing prescription drugs, get professional help immediately. If you don't, you're putting your relationships, your work and your future at risk.

By Drew Edwards, EdD

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